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Fade to Black

Britten, 'O Waly, Waly' (1947), in Terence Davies's *Distant Voices, Still Lives*

(1988)

Heather Wiebe

Terence Davies's film *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) might as well be an opera: emotion is more central than narrative, and singing, rather than dialogue, carries much of the weight. Dwelling on Davies's own family and a lost working-class life in 1940s-50s Liverpool, the film is filled with scenes of singing and listening, as popular songs are rendered powerful for their ability to connect intimacy and public life and to form bonds of community and memory. Alongside such scenes, the film includes other vocal sounds that call on personal and cultural memory: radio broadcasts of litany-like speech (the shipping forecast, the racing results) and unaccompanied vocal music, such as the soprano vocalise from Vaughan Williams's 'Pastoral' Symphony, and the performance of 'In the Brief Midwinter' that opens the King's College Festival of Lessons and Carols. Much of the singing has an 'ethnographic immediacy', as Berthold Hoeckner notes.¹ And yet, as the film stages memories of Davies's family – some of them his own, some of them borrowed 'second-hand' from his sisters and mother – it also uses voice and song to explore ideas of distance, mediation and absence.²

¹ Berthold Hoeckner, 'Transport and Transportation in Audio-Visual Memory', in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer and Richard Leppert (Berkeley, 2007), 176.

² Terence Davies, *A Modest Pageant: Children, Madonna and Child, Death and Transfiguration, Distant Voices, Still Lives and The Long Day Closes* (London,

The voice's role in mediating the past is especially at issue in the last moments of the film, when we hear Peter Pears singing Benjamin Britten's arrangement of the folksong 'O Waly, Waly' (1947). This song acts as the film's closing frame. The opening frame, after a ghostly prologue in which the characters are audible but not visible, is a recording of Jessye Norman singing a spiritual, unaccompanied ('There's a Man Going Round Taking Names'); the transition between the two short films that constitute *Distant Voices, Still Lives* is set to Britten's unaccompanied choral work *Hymn to the Virgin* (1930, rev. 1934). All of this music is non-diegetic, functioning as narrative commentary; if the film's popular songs are objects of memory, this music seems to represent the process of remembering. Indeed, it acts as a bridge: between high culture and the vernacular, between past and present. The bridging function of the Pears performance seems especially elaborate. Unlike the Jessye Norman recording, which belongs to the 1980s, the Pears recording could almost be within the world of the film. It was issued in 1962, but Britten's arrangement was published in 1947, and Davies could have heard Pears perform Britten's folksongs on the radio in his childhood, much as he recalls hearing Kathleen Ferrier singing 'Blow the Wind Southerly', a recording he includes in another autobiographical film, *The Long Day Closes*.³ And yet, the song is also clearly set apart, with its piano accompaniment and

1992), xi. The songs, too, might be called second-hand, in that Davies had his family sing them on tapes and selected those he remembered (Paul Farley, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (London, 2006), 76).

³ *Folk Songs: Peter Pears, Benjamin Britten*, Decca SXL 6007 (London, 1962); Benjamin Britten, *Folksong Arrangements, Vol. 3: British Isles* (London, 1947); Wendy Everett, *Terence Davies* (Manchester, 2004), 201-202.

its displacement of all diegetic sound. It is both outside and tantalizingly close to the film's conjured world.

Like Norman's spiritual, this is a lament. And while its narrative of betrayed love might seem irrelevant to the film's plot, its concerns with distance and loss resonate. Britten's setting, meanwhile, dwells on the idea of traversing distance drawn from the opening line: 'The water is wide, I cannot cross o'er'. As in so many of his folksongs, Britten distills the text into one musical image pervading the accompaniment: here, a simple repeated rocking figure (suggesting the motion of a boat) moves across the piano, while the right and left hands approach each other and drift apart. It is an image of distance on which Davies's film actively reflects in its closing moments, when the song takes over the narrative.

In these final moments, a wedding ends, the groom standing outside the family home overtaken by emotion. At first we hear sounds from the house, but these fade away and the piano fades in, as the assembled family begins to disperse into the night. Now the sound of Pears singing displaces all the other voices in the film. The words we hear, just before the piano enters, both act as a kind of farewell to the viewer and become split from the image, anticipating the farewells seen but not heard in the last moments of the film. (In the original script, the characters' farewells are interpolated into the song, but in the final film, while the images follow the script, the dialogue is heard earlier and slightly out of order.⁴) If these farewells are acoustically compressed, visually the film lingers on a series of departures, mapping them onto the structure of the song itself as the characters recede into darkness. At the end of the first stanza, the car carrying off the bride and groom fades away. (This reverses the opening of the film, when a hearse arrives at the home as Norman begins to sing.)

⁴ Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, 132-134.

Then, in the second verse, the rest of the family walks into the night, as the shifting figure in the piano ascends, becoming denser and increasingly distant from the tonal centre, before returning to the security of the song's opening chords. The characters might seem to disappear a little belatedly, in the middle of the third verse, but it is the camera movement that maps onto the song's structure, as it tracks the group closely and then suddenly stops just as the third verse begins, and the figures continue on without it, eventually moving out of sight. This process of fading away repeats, inexorably now, through the rest of the third and fourth verse, when the camera rejoins the last three members of the family – Davies's mother, sister and brother-in-law – and is then left behind again as they slowly disappear into the black screen.

The fifth and final verse dwells on the idea of passing time and fading away, the last line echoing the fade of the camera and the disappearance of the film's remembered world.

O, love is handsome and love is fine
and love's a jewel while it is new,
But when it is old, it groweth cold
and fades away like morning dew.⁵

The verse accompanies the closing credits, but in the screenplay, it was meant to sound against a black screen, ending in silence before the credits appear.⁶ The screenplay thus makes the centrality of the final verse clearer than the finished film. It functions as the culmination of the repeated calls for 'darkness' and to 'fade to black' that litter this entire section of the script.⁷ Even without this stark final visual

⁵ Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, 133-134.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, 131-34.

representation of absence, though, the verse's association with fading memory is clear, and is musically reinforced in the song's ending, with its *ppp* dynamic and final *diminuendo* in the lower depths of the piano. It is this process of fading into darkness and silence that seems at the heart of the song's use in the film.

Pears's voice seems so foregrounded here, and so recognizable, that it is somewhat disconcerting to find that the original screenplay calls for 'an unaccompanied soprano in the arrangement by Benjamin Britten'.⁸ (By contrast, Norman's performance is specified in the script.) Davies's initial choice of a soprano is consistent with a tendency to favour the unaccompanied female voice throughout the film, particularly that of the mother. The final choice of Pears represents a small but important shift, as his recorded singing displaces the mother's voice in these parting moments, just as it displaces the spoken dialogue.⁹ Indeed, with the use of Pears, the song is pushed further outside the world of the film and becomes aligned with a narrative voice rather than a remembered one; if the film is autobiographical and the song acts in a narrative role, Pears's voice might even be seen as a stand-in for Davies himself, another gay British artist of a slightly later generation.

At the same time, Pears's singing here marks a shift from the conjured presence of the remembered voice to the voice as absence. Even the use of Norman at the opening of *Distant Voices* seems palpably different, helping to bring memories into being rather than sending them off. In the film's closing moments, on the other hand, it not only deploys Pears's voice as non-diegetic in the simplest sense; in

⁸ Davies, *A Modest Pageant*, 132.

⁹ This would not be the first time Pears has been associated with the mother's voice: *Letters From a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, Vol. 1, 1923–1938, ed. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (London, 1991), 16.

rendering it conspicuously so, it plays on the sense of distance and absence long associated with the acousmatic voice, but also on Pears's particular association with the acousmatic: the pervasive mediatisation of his voice in combination with its peculiarly distanced quality. We might think about Pears's role as the ghostly Quint in *Turn of the Screw* as exemplifying this quality – the way in which his voice functions as *acousmêtre* even when he is visible. It is both instantly recognisable as his and dissociated from his body, in ways that lend it to acts of substitution and render them particularly uncanny. One might say it is an especially salient example of Mladen Dolar's more global point about the acousmatic voice: that 'there is no such thing as disacousmatization. The source of the voice can never be seen, it stems from an undisclosed and structurally concealed interior, it cannot possibly match what we can see ... Every emission of the voice is by its very essence ventriloquism'.¹⁰ As *Distant Voices, Still Lives* ends, what Pears's voice makes so conspicuously present is absence itself, as memories fade into darkness, and the re-enacted voices of the family disappear.

¹⁰ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 70.